

## AFGHANISTAN – ALTERNATIVE FUTURES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

BY

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# USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

## AFGHANISTAN – ALTERNATIVE FUTURES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The future is a combination of what ‘will be’ and what ‘can be.’ Perhaps no single country exercises more global influence over the factors that sway what “can be” than those actions of the United States. Its preeminent influence extends across almost every global domain (economic, social, political, military and cultural), and reaches down into nearly every country of the world. However, the world order consists of a complex, adaptive and open system that complicates and often obviates US strategies. However, the development and analysis of alternative future scenarios provides a means of identifying and examining numerous convoluted factors that can profoundly influence those strategies. This paper examines the interests and activities of the major stakeholders within a regional and global context and develops four alternative scenarios describing the future of Afghanistan. The scenarios divulge three strategic precepts: (1) the criticality of establishing viable decentralized governance at the local, district and provincial levels; (2) the accommodation of MODERATE Taliban factions as part of the governance structure in select areas where they have a strong influence; and (3) accomplishing both of these actions BEFORE the US withdraws its combat forces.





## AFGHANISTAN – ALTERNATIVE FUTURES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

The future is a combination of what 'will be' and what 'can be.' What 'will be' is brought about by factors and events outside the control and influence of strategic leaders. For instance, natural disasters and even many social trends are immune to external controls and management. However, strategic leaders have the ability, through their leadership and strategies, to bring about positive future outcomes to influence what 'can be.'

Perhaps no single country exercises more influence over the factors that sway what 'can be' than those actions of the United States (US). Its preeminent influence extends across almost every global domain (economic, social, political, military, and cultural), and extends down into nearly every developed country of the world. As the sole superpower, its major foreign policy and even domestic policy decisions affect the world. However, the world order consists of a complex, adaptive, and open system that complicates and often obviates US strategies designed to achieve positive outcomes. Cause-and-effect estimates of foreign policy activities fuel many unpredictable responses with second and third-order effects that can literally overwhelm the expected first-order response. This is further complicated by time delays in reactions, counter-reactions, and counter-counter reactions, etc. that may camouflage or obscure the long term negative consequences of an apparent short term positive response to an implemented strategy. This is especially true during periods of armed conflict where uncertainty, volatility and ambiguity are dramatically increased and fear, fog, and friction obfuscate even transparent policy intentions. Nevertheless, the development and analysis of alternative future scenarios provides a means of identifying and examining

numerous factors relevant in formulating or modifying effective goals and strategies. This paper examines the context of the current conflict in Afghanistan, assesses the interests and activities of major stakeholders within a regional and global context, develops alternative scenarios for the future of Afghanistan, and then uses these scenarios to highlight possible outcomes and the governing factors affecting the current US Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak ) Strategy. The intent is to provide an analysis that helps policy makers improve strategies to achieve a more positive strategic outcome.

### Existing Environment in Afghanistan

Immediately following the appalling September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States began a campaign in Afghanistan aimed at both eliminating the al Qaeda extremists who organized, planned and conducted the 9/11 attack and replacing the Taliban government who provided a sanctuary for the al Qaeda activities.<sup>1</sup> After almost 10 years, the Afghan War is becoming increasingly unpopular with the American public and is losing its political support both from within the US and the international community.<sup>2</sup> Responding to a deteriorating strategic environment in Afghanistan and growing US public opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, President Obama announced both a 'surge' and 'exit plan' for Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> The new strategy intends to create the conditions for a feasible transition; implements a civilian surge that institutes positive civic reforms; and shape an effective partnership with Pakistan to defeat insurgent forces operating from remote Afghan-Pakistan areas astride their mutual border.<sup>4</sup>

Since the decision to increase US military forces and improve civil-support activities, there have been many related accomplishments that include: increasing the

training and education of Afghan security forces, providing additional funding for internal development projects, and most important, wresting major areas from the Taliban.<sup>5</sup> Still, there remain many daunting challenges including mollifying the competing interests of the major external stakeholders.

Amplifying the oftentimes competing and disparate interests between the stakeholders is the perception of the abandonment of Afghanistan by the United States and the prospects of the transition to a capable Afghan government. Many stakeholders believe that the final American withdrawal is already well underway and will progress regardless of the strategic conditions in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> Notably, the Afghans do not appear ready to assume security and governance responsibilities<sup>7</sup> with the central government rife with corruption and mismanagement.<sup>8</sup>

### US Experience and the Tragedy of Afghanistan

The American intervention into Afghanistan is similar to former historic military campaigns into this remote and inhospitable region.<sup>9</sup> Despite the substantial US involvement in supporting the Afghan insurgency against the Soviets, few American policymakers had an appreciation of the geographic, social, and cultural complexities of Afghanistan. The policymakers had to relearn hard lessons, most important of which was that building a central government and associated security structure in a splintered, tribal-centric society is substantially more difficult than overthrowing the existing government.<sup>10</sup> The ascent of the Taliban and revival of the insurgency after the initial American victory was cataclysmic. However, even more tragic is the fact that many military commanders and policy makers knew the scope of the strategic challenges but

nevertheless failed to convince the US leadership of the gravity of the potential risks and the extent of resourcing needed to ensure long term strategic success.<sup>11</sup>

Failure to establish an effective government following the overthrow of the Taliban established the conditions for increased violence and the insurgency. Governance at the local, provincial and national levels was weak and ineffectual. Resources were both inadequate and mismanaged with many rural areas experiencing no improvements in services such as electricity and water.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, there was an absence of manpower to provide security and establish favorable condition for effective decentralized governance that could have precluded the growth of the insurgency. Notably, the ratio of international troops to host nation population was below that of every nation-building intervention since World War II. Moreover, by 2003, most of the financial resources were being consumed by operations in Iraq allowing the fragile internal stability of Afghanistan to continue to deteriorate. Thus, the overwhelming initial strategic success against the Taliban was squandered as growing corruption, ineffectual governance and the absence of security forces allowed the Taliban to regain the initiative.<sup>13</sup>

#### Stakeholders and their Interests

Afghanistan's six immediate neighbors (China, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) and its close neighbors (Russia, India, and Saudi Arabia) all have a stake in Afghanistan's future when the US withdraws. Of these regional actors, Pakistan likely exercises the most influence over the strategic outcome due to its role in combating extremists on the border and its influence with the Pashtuns,<sup>14</sup> who are the largest and most influential ethnic group within Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> However, it is the

US and the West who currently exercise influence over the finances, military power, and other governance and economic reform efforts that will likely dictate strategic success or failure. Additionally, it is increasingly apparent that the US and its allies must rely on Afghanistan's neighbors to at least avoid derailing the progress made, and ideally, to continue to support progress when the US withdraws. This requires a deliberate effort to resolve regional issues that preclude effective cooperation between those stakeholders. In the words of General David Petraeus who was Commander of US Central Command at the time, "It's not possible to resolve the challenges internal to Afghanistan without addressing the challenges, especially in terms of security, related to Afghanistan's neighbors."<sup>16</sup> The important question is: "Do these key states see their own interests with regards to counterterrorism, governance in Afghanistan, and longer term reconstruction and economic development in such a way that a working consensus among them could be forged?"<sup>17</sup> The influence and interventions by external stakeholders may be crucial in achieving long term stability and prosperity in Afghanistan.

*Pakistan.* Pakistan's past, present and future is closely linked with Afghanistan. A peaceful, united and stable Afghanistan is critical for Pakistan's security and is a top policy objective. At the same time, Pakistan needs to prevent the opening of another hostile front should Afghanistan emerge as a proxy for India. Consequently, Pakistan will closely follow India's efforts to influence Afghanistan and may take aggressive measures to undermine India's efforts in this regard.<sup>18</sup> To a lesser degree, an alternative supply route through Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to support International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operations in Afghanistan is also perceived as lessening

Pakistan's role and influence in Afghanistan. Also, there are currently 1.7 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Over the past years, in spite of huge internal security and financial challenges, Pakistan has hosted these refugees within its borders. However, it would prefer to see the refugees return to Afghanistan and take whatever measures needed to prevent a further influx of refugees. Thus, ensuring a secure, stable and relatively prosperous Afghanistan is of critical importance to Pakistan. Although these interests appear to drive conflicting engagement strategies, they will all influence Pakistan's Afghan policy formulation process.<sup>19</sup>

*India.* The main concerns of India are tied to its perceived security and economic interests. These interests relate to its rivalry with Pakistan; the perceived dangers posed by a return of a Taliban-controlled Afghan government that sponsors terrorism threatening India; and the exploitation of the economic opportunities possible with a stable and prosperous Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> India strongly opposes any accommodation with the Taliban in the governance of Afghanistan in that it perceives a nexus between the Taliban, al Qaeda terrorists, and jihadist groups operating in Pakistan that are all hostile to India. This strong desire to avert a return of the Taliban in the governance of Afghanistan, at any level, may work at cross purposes with the US and Western exit strategy that may require the integration of less radical elements of the Taliban at local, provincial and national levels. Likewise, India favors the inclusion of Russia and Iran in a regional forum to address Afghan development and governance issues because both countries also oppose the Taliban.<sup>21</sup> Although India's uncompromising anti-Taliban position has recently softened, India could still move to be a major destabilizing force if it perceives that a return of a radicalized Taliban government is likely.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, it is

within India's economic interests to advance regional cooperation and support a stable and prosperous Afghanistan to help form secure transit corridors that connect the oil and gas rich Central and West Asia region with the Asian sub-continent.<sup>23</sup>

*Iran.* Like India, Iran is strongly opposed to a return of Taliban rule in Afghanistan as it is likely to create political, ethnic, and religious tensions within Iran. Therefore, a stable Taliban-free Afghan government is Iran's top objective. Other interests include eliminating drug smuggling into Iran and taking preventive measures that would avert additional Afghan refugees from entering Iran.<sup>24</sup> Generally, Iran would prefer an Afghan government susceptible to Iranian influence and could be expected to overtly and covertly oppose a resurgent Taliban-controlled Afghan central government.

*Saudi Arabia.* The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an important player in the region and favors the establishment of an Islamic government in Afghanistan. Its interest and activities in Afghanistan and South Asia must be seen and understood in the context of its long and historical relations with Pakistan and its troubled and tense relationship with Iran. Significantly, Saudi Arabia would oppose the return of an extremist Taliban government; however, Saudi Arabia does differentiate moderate from radical Taliban factions and would support the former group's constructive participation in the future Afghan government. Saudi Arabian influence and financial support could be a critical factor in helping to stabilize Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup>

*Central Asian Republics.* The close proximity and intertwined history forms the basis of deep linkages between Afghanistan and the five Central Asian Republics. The bordering countries: Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have the greatest level of anxiety about the security situation and presence of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, drug

trafficking, ambiguity about reconciliation and negotiation process and the absence of moderate Taliban from the process.<sup>26</sup> Generally, the Central Asian Republics place the greatest priority on Afghan stability and law enforcement even if it means a return to Taliban rule. Since Tajiks are the second largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, Tajikistan would likely respond to a deteriorating social and political environment within Afghanistan and move to secure and advance the Tajik minority interests.<sup>27</sup>

*China.* Prime Chinese interests in Afghanistan are connected to their domestic counterterrorism issues, the need for energy and mineral resources, and the exploitation of economic opportunities. However, these interests are also closely linked with China's privileged relationship with Pakistan, its policies concerning South and Central Asia, and its bilateral relations with the United States.<sup>28</sup> A stable and prosperous Afghanistan could be the key to achieving these interests. As such, the Chinese and the United States have numerous common interests that include combating terrorism, containing rising extremism, and supporting stability across the region. However, both countries have divergent views on how to address the threat of terrorism and the geopolitics of the region with China willing to accept and negotiate with the leaders of extremist groups.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, China is capable of providing considerable economic support and investment that could improve the political, economic and social sectors within Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup> Although barriers to cooperation exist between China and the United States, their coincident interests in achieving stability and prosperity in Afghanistan provide a great opportunity to enhance their mutual relationship and collaborate towards achieving common goals.<sup>31</sup> China's future role in



Afghanistan would likely be focused on exploiting economic opportunities rather than arresting a deteriorating social or security environment.

*Russia.* Russian interests in Afghanistan are centered primarily on possible threats to its own security and the security of its former Soviet republics in Central Asia. Generally, Russia strives to maintain soft hegemony over its Central Asian neighbors.<sup>32</sup> Correspondingly, Afghanistan poses two threats to Russia: one is the threat of instability in Central Asia should Afghanistan devolve into chaos following a precipitous withdrawal by the US and NATO forces. The second is posed by the current, and potentially increased, drug trafficking through Central Asia to a growing consumer base within Russia.<sup>33</sup> At present, Russia's objectives in Afghanistan include: support to the coalition in order to prevent Taliban's return to power; reducing the inflow of narcotics into Russia emanating from Afghanistan; and establishing a stable Afghanistan as a buffer between the Greater Middle East and Central Asia. However, as noted, Russia will pursue these interests while concurrently trying to maintain or increase its influence over the Central Asia republics.<sup>34</sup>

*Europe.* The countries in the European Union have a different perspective about the conflict in Afghanistan. Due to diverse interests, various perceptions and domestic pressures, European countries have no common policy, strategy, or diplomatic framework. More important, the people and governments in Europe do not perceive the potential terrorist threat posed by a radical Taliban- controlled Afghanistan as significant. Their basic aim is just to demonstrate support for the United States in the war against terrorism and maintain the viability of the NATO alliance while limiting the cost of engagement. European public support for the war is almost non-existent and

they see little or no prospects for strategic success given the way the war is currently being conducted. Consequently, the Europeans have very limited strategic objectives and they seek to exit Afghanistan at the earliest possible opportunity before the NATO alliance is further weakened by what they consider a futile campaign. Generally, Europeans also view a viable regional strategy as politically unfeasible and would rather pursue a more focused and potentially important engagement with Pakistan. They view Pakistan as the key strategic linchpin countering terrorism in the region and thus seek to resolve India-Pakistan security issues that could then empower a more aggressive and effective Pakistani role in combating terrorism and securing regional stability.<sup>35</sup>

#### Competing and Converging Interests of Stakeholders in Afghanistan

There are coincident interests and substantial disparities among the stakeholders.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, to integrate Afghanistan's neighbors collectively or individually into a single regional strategy would require major efforts to assuage enmities and reinforce commonalities of interests.<sup>37</sup> Although many support the same objectives of stability and prosperity for Afghanistan, they differ significantly on how to achieve those objectives within Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> Clearly, not every stakeholder can be accommodated and its interests satisfied. Thus, a viable strategy must attract and incorporate those stakeholders who have the means, opportunity, and strength of coincident interests necessary to achieve attainable strategic objectives for Afghanistan and the region while minimizing those stakeholders who have significant opposing interests on how that will be achieved within Afghanistan. Some experts believe that substantial differences between the regional actors on internal Afghan issues actually preclude cooperation and obviate a regional strategy.<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding, the US and its

allies will continue to pursue a strategy that will evoke both positive and negative responses by regional actors and factions internal to Afghanistan. Figure 1 provides a short depiction of the major regional actors, the relative strength of their interests, and their overall ability to project power and influence to pursue those interests.

### Stakeholder Assessment

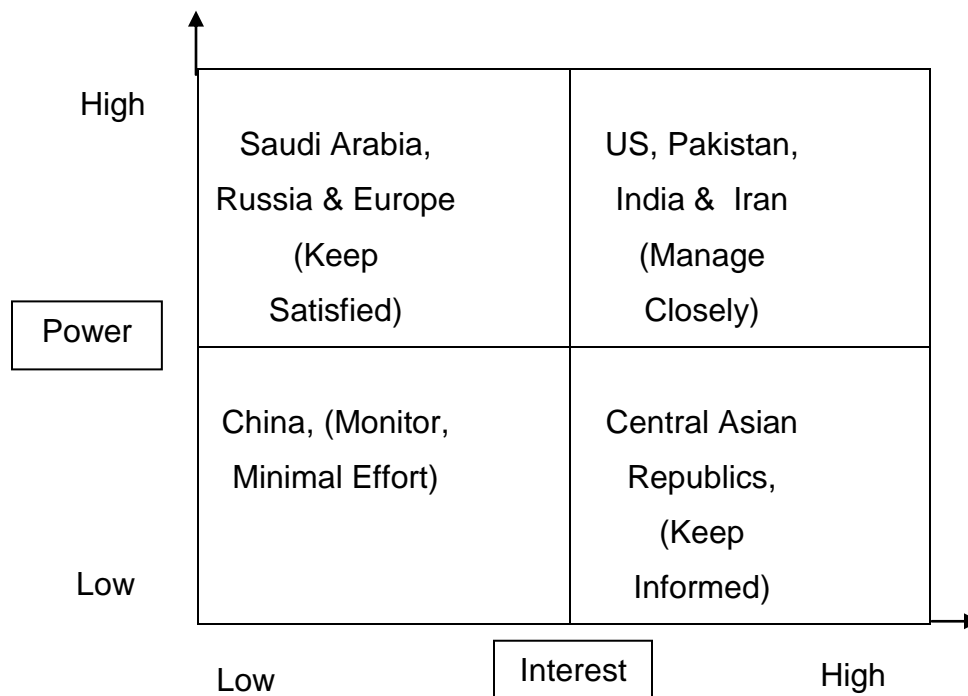


Figure 1: Power/ Interest Matrix for Stakeholders<sup>40</sup> in Afghanistan

Besides the United States, Pakistan, India and Iran are high power and high interest stakeholders when considering strategies for Afghanistan. Therefore, these countries should be closely managed. Saudi Arabia, Russia and Europe are key regional actors with high related influence but relatively low interest in Afghanistan. The Central Asian republics, due to their high interest and low power, should be kept informed and accommodated as long as it does not alienate those high power

stakeholders. Although China enjoys a substantial influence in the region, it has relatively low interest and low power to directly influence actions within Afghanistan, but it also needs to be continuously monitored to gauge a change in its interest. While external stakeholders may influence the internal dynamics of the Afghan operational environment, the success or failure of the US strategy will likely depend on its ability to influence internal factors while simultaneously preventing external stakeholders from disrupting those efforts.

### Understanding Internal Dynamics

Important internal influential actors which will have direct bearing on the future of Afghanistan are the present Afghan government, the Taliban,<sup>41</sup> the Northern Alliance,<sup>42</sup> and other insurgent factions and warlords. Factionalism, credible governance, Afghan social dynamics, and drug production and export all influence these internal stakeholders and their inter-relationships.

Since the overthrow of the Taliban government by Northern Alliance, the Karzai government and the US, together with its allies, have been engaged mostly in a civil war over power-sharing. The war is being conducted against a loose knit set of insurgent groups formed and fighting along ethnic lines, rural against urban factions, and over religious sectarian differences.<sup>43</sup> Since the insurgency began, there has been a strengthening of the insurgency and a visible reappearance of Taliban and other insurgent groups. Significantly, the increase in insurgent activity is occurring against the backdrop of a substantial increase in the number of coalition and American forces combating these elements within Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup> Statistically there has been a 40 percent increase in attacks by insurgents in each of the last four years.<sup>45</sup> This has

resulted in a considerable rise in combat and non-combat casualties and increased intimidation of civilians and tribal elders associated with the government and nongovernmental organizations.<sup>46</sup>

In response, the allies enhanced counterinsurgency operations and accelerated the transition of security and governance responsibilities to Afghan authorities. However, to effect the transition the coalition must first establish a legitimate and functioning government, prevent outside meddling by external stakeholders and build a professional, proficient, and robust security structure. These are huge challenges due to the ineffectiveness of the current Afghan regime.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, the insurgent forces are also facing noticeable signs of weariness and disillusionment due to the long struggle, effective allied military operations, and some economic progress within Afghanistan. However, most insurgents do not believe that the US possesses the political will to continue the fight and thus intend to prolong the struggle until an exhausted US is forced to withdraw.<sup>48</sup>

Correspondingly, most Afghanis do not support or sympathize with the Taliban as they see them as the cause of their problems and hardships. They also believe that the Taliban presence in their areas attract destructive military operations and hinder development projects.<sup>49</sup>

Although the insurgents are not particularly popular, they are usually favored over the corrupt and ineffective Afghan government. Likewise, the insurgent motivation and source of popular support is largely based upon Afghan government corruption and abuse of power, the apparent invasion and occupation of Afghanistan by foreign forces, and a corresponding perceived threat to Afghan and Islamic values and culture. The

social and economic deprivations experienced by major sectors of the populace, and opportunism also plays an important role.<sup>50</sup>

As in most insurgencies, the population is the center of gravity in the complex Afghan strategic environment and there is competition between all parties to secure their support and confidence. Such pressures have forced the Taliban to voice their consent to negotiations as the people of Afghanistan overwhelmingly support cooperation between the warring factions. However, there are significant hindrances to the negotiation process. The main stumbling block is the deep mistrust among stakeholders, ambivalence of the US towards negotiations, and the absence of a credible mediator who could anchor and move this difficult negotiation process forward.<sup>51</sup>

There are numerous related strategic objectives which, in combination, would shape the future developments in Afghanistan and frame future scenarios:

- Eliminate al Qaeda and its leadership in Afghanistan and reduce Taliban capability to return to power in Kabul by force;<sup>52</sup>
- Balance governance responsibilities between an effective central government in Kabul with decentralized power-sharing authorities at the provincial/district levels using local, community and traditional (tribal/religious) structures;<sup>53</sup>
- Defuse the major rivalries of global and regional stakeholders by seeking an agreement over Afghanistan neutrality;<sup>54</sup>
- Sustain economic growth and establish a viable trade and transit corridor between Central and South Asia;<sup>55</sup>

- Provide a secure, peaceful and stable environment protecting the Afghan populace and reduce terrorist activities to limited random acts of violence;<sup>56</sup>
- Gain control of narcotics production and reduce associated illegal trafficking (weapons, crime and ideology).<sup>57</sup>

How these objectives are pursued by the Afghan government, the US and its allies, and the other regional and global stakeholders will profoundly influence their achievement. To this end, the use of scenario-based analysis can explore some possible outcomes of alternative strategic approaches designed to achieve these objectives.

### Scenarios

These scenarios are not predictions nor are they expected consequences of one or more strategies. Rather the following scenarios are narratives of alternative future environments that manifest plausible developments by combining underlying influences and trends. The alternative scenarios highlight the risks and opportunities of possible future events driven by alternative engagement activities and the likely responses of the relevant stakeholders within the postulated environment.<sup>58</sup> The paper describes four scenarios each framed by two related conditions. Each scenario contains a brief projection of the operational and strategic environment, identifies scenario goals, and describes a way forward. The scenarios combine factors and trends in a cohesive and holistic manner to illuminate the underlying assumptions and the implications for potential engagement measures.<sup>59</sup>

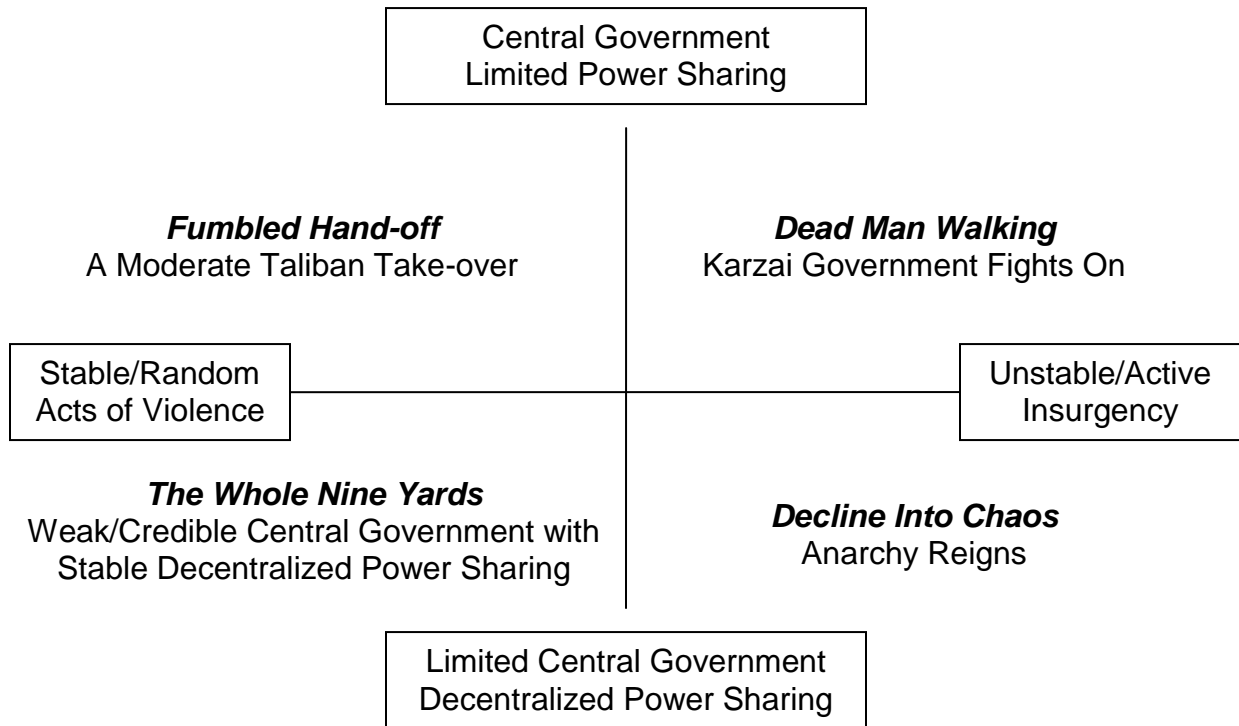


Figure 2: Scenario Conceptual Framework

Figure 2 provides the conceptual framework for the four scenarios considered. The Cartesian plane portrays two major variables: the vertical axis depicts the level of governance (either strong central governance or a more traditional Afghan decentralized governance approach). The horizontal axis portrays the level of stability: a relatively stable social/political environment limited to individual random acts of violence and, at the other extreme, postulating an unstable political and security environment with an active insurgency/civil war. Each quadrant uses a pairing of those four states to frame a scenario, examine possible strategic intervention measures and explore potential strategic outcomes.

*Fumbled Hand-off (A Moderate Taliban Takeover).* The US and its allies continue training Afghan security forces and transition responsibilities to the Afghanis. Apparent operational successes against extremist Taliban and eventual negotiated agreements



with moderate insurgent groups allow for an orderly withdrawal of US and Allied forces. Following the US withdrawal, the Afghan government extends governance responsibilities to the Taliban at the local, district and provincial levels to assuage possible resurgent threats. Renascent corruption and incompetence in the Karzai government erodes the central government's credibility and creates the conditions for a resurgent though moderate Taliban. Taliban influence grows from districts to provinces to finally seizing control of the Central government. The moderate Taliban shape a coalition with major ethnic groups to form a strong and viable central government. The Taliban government expels remaining al Qaeda elements from the country and provides guarantees to the West that terrorism will not be exported from Afghanistan. Sharia law is implemented from the central government and eliminates drug production, infringes on the rights of women, and also limits economic growth. However, the absence of terrorist threats to the West and an overall lack of political will or popular support precludes the US and its allies from re-entering Afghanistan. Iran, India, and the Central Asian Republics are dissuaded from interfering in the internal affairs of Afghanistan by assurances from the Taliban government that it will not export terrorism nor tolerate al Qaeda factions within its borders. Regional actors begin to engage the moderate Taliban government and open diplomatic and economic ties. Afghanistan limps towards economic growth with external countries exploiting newly discovered mineral deposits and opening trade routes to the Central Asia republics. Although Afghanistan is stable, there continues to be some internal resistance and limited acts of violence against the Taliban's harsh domestic policies and international criticism of the infringements on women/human rights.

*Goals and Way Forward.* From the US and international perspective this is a marginally acceptable outcome. In this scenario, Afghanistan hovers on the brink of becoming a failed state with the real danger that it might once again become a source of terrorist activities. The main United States goal would be to ensure that al-Qaeda does not make a return to Afghanistan and that Afghanistan is prevented from becoming a source of terrorist attacks outside Afghan borders. The United States should engage the Taliban with the help of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan so as to ensure that Afghanistan does not return to a pre-2001 state. At the same time it should encourage the Afghan government to incorporate the major ethnic and political groups into its central government. This could provide an effective counter-balance to a resurgent extremist Taliban rule in Kabul. The United States should use a concerted carrot and stick approach with the Taliban to dissuade the export of terrorism as well as threaten the use of precision strikes should al Qaeda or other terrorists seek refuge and receive support from the Taliban government. The United States would continue to seek assistance from Afghanistan's neighbors to stop any meddling into Afghan internal affairs and help deny cross border safe havens for potential insurgent or terrorist groups.

*The Whole Nine Yards (Karzai government agrees to decentralize power and accommodate moderate Taliban at district and provincial levels).* As in the previous scenario, the US and its allies make an orderly withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, the US, NATO, and Afghan government make a deliberate effort to integrate moderate Taliban elements into selected local governments before departure and oversee the decentralization and power sharing of the central government to these authorities. The

US assists the Karzai government in the establishment of effective governing structures at the provincial, district and local levels with adequate funding, construction of facilities, and empowered security forces. The Karzai government establishes and retains the military capability to eliminate any subversive threats to the central government. Sharia law is practiced and enforced at various local governance levels but is limited to mostly remote areas within Afghanistan. Even these Sharia enclaves become pressured to change due to negative local public sentiment and pressure from human rights groups. The present government, Taliban, Northern Alliance and other major groups agree on power sharing, equitable distribution of revenues, and on ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan. All find common ground in opposing the external regional influences and interferences. Due to these positive developments, peace is restored in most of the areas. This paves the way for heavy investment by the donor countries, World Bank and IMF. The absence of a foreign presence, economic progress, and effective local governance defuse the source causes of the insurgency and Afghanistan muddles towards stability and economic prosperity; slowly overcoming the deleterious effects of political corruption and its fractured, decentralized governance.

*Goals and Way Forward.* The involvement of the Taliban will cause some uncertainty within the US and other stakeholders. However, this scenario provides greater chance of stability in Afghanistan because the transition and accommodation of the moderate Taliban occurs while the US is in a position to positively influence the transition. The goal would be to remain closely involved and engaged in this critical and sensitive transition effort. The United States must also continue with financial aid and military assistance to enable the efficient establishment of local governance structures.

Working with the Afghan government, the United States may engage Afghanistan's neighbors by encouraging them to maintain good relations, rather than interfering in Afghan internal affairs. The United States should assist the Afghan military in conducting limited operations against any remaining al-Qaeda elements within Afghanistan while enhancing military cooperation with a focus on training and exchanges. Nevertheless, the main focus of the United States, along with the government of Afghanistan, would be on ensuring a credible though limited central government that shares power with the many local, district and regional entities.

*Decline into Chaos (Anarchy Reigns).* The US and allies conduct an abrupt<sup>60</sup> departure, leaving behind a weak government that faces an inactive insurgency essentially waiting for the United States to withdraw. The Afghanistan government fails to ensure security, stability, and the provision of services due to corruption, infighting and weak national security forces. There is no consensus government and the militias/warlords gain strength and increasingly assume the responsibility for maintaining order and exercising governance. The Afghan government, the Taliban, and a regrouped Northern Alliance engage in combat for the control of Kabul. Fighting spreads to most parts of Afghanistan as the insurgents fight for local governance against a perceived corrupt and ineffectual central authority. The tribal, ethnic and sectarian insurgents cause the division of Afghanistan into different zones controlled by different groups, many affiliated with different regional actors. Neighboring countries exercise influence in areas inside Afghanistan to support proxy insurgents, secure their respective groups, and safeguard their interests. In addition, regional stakeholders also buy influence by providing financial aid, weapons, and supplies to selected tribal

chiefs/faction. These factions vie for power and/or seek retribution for current and past transgressions. The Taliban renew their offensive and are able to establish control in Eastern and Southern parts of Afghanistan including Kabul. The rest of the country (Western and Northern parts of Afghanistan) comes under the control of various Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara tribes or leaders. Regional tensions grow and persist as each major regional antagonist reacts to the provocative responses and the interventions of each other. Afghan security forces begin to break down and desert as funding and training suffer due to the continued level of conflict, the diversion of resources by corrupt officials, and the recruitment of these security personnel by warring ethnic, tribal, and sectarian factions. Anarchy reigns as refugees pour into the neighboring countries of Iran, the Central Asian Republics, and Pakistan. Western nations lack the will to re-deploy combat forces into Afghanistan but neighboring countries conduct limited cross border forays into Afghanistan to protect their respective groups and/or pursue criminals and combatants. The UN conducts humanitarian relief operations to help assuage suffering, but does not commit to peacekeeping or peacemaking operations. Afghanistan devolves into a failed and largely ungoverned state with established enclaves of tribal, ethnic, and sectarian governed areas. Al Qaeda re-establishes terrorist training camps within the country and the US conducts periodic strike operations against selected terrorist targets using global strike capabilities, violating Afghan sovereignty and further alienating many Muslim countries.

*Goals and Way Forward.* This is the most dangerous scenario. The US goals would be to engage all stakeholders, contain the conflict within the borders of Afghanistan, avoid an all-out regional war, and prevent any terrorist attacks from being

coordinated or launched from Afghanistan. The US would have to make aggressive diplomatic efforts to dissuade provocative action or intervention by regional stakeholders that could spark a regional conflict. It is doubtful whether the US public would support a return of US ground forces into Afghanistan, but would likely tolerate US military supplies and/or financial support for a multi-national or UN response. It is likely that the regional actors and the United States would have to wait for the conflict to run its course before directly intervening in Afghanistan. The potential human suffering would be profound.

*Dead man walking (The Karzai Government Fights On).* The United States and its allies withdraw leaving an active but weakened insurgency and a viable but limited Afghan security force capability. In this scenario, the Karzai government maintains its control of Kabul and several provinces but it is unable to establish decentralized governance structures at the local, district, and provincial levels in many contested areas due to a combination of a lack of resources and active resistance in those areas. Consequently, the Karzai government continues to fight insurgent elements with available Afghan security forces and is able to maintain its power in Kabul, but nowhere else. The central government is unable to make substantial progress either in combating the insurgency or in extending its governance authority. Afghanistan thus settles into an active civil war with major areas of the country ungoverned while teetering on becoming a failed state. The general Afghan campaign against all Taliban serves to further radicalize even the moderate Taliban factions. Consequently, the rural areas come under increasing control of radical Taliban which in turn threatens a return of an extremist Taliban takeover and a safe haven for al Qaeda terrorists. However, the

absence of a clear and present terrorist threat to the United States coupled with a lack of political will prevents the US from re-deploying combat troops back into Afghanistan. Additionally, the return of rampant corruption within the Afghan government coupled with the poor security environment in Kabul dissuades foreign investment and economic support from the international community. Drug production and illicit trade continues to rise and the social and security environment incrementally declines. Regional stakeholders and neighbors respond with covert and, in some instances, overt support to their respective factions within Afghanistan and vie for hegemony and influence in the deteriorating Afghan internal political environment.

*Goals and Way Forward.* This scenario generally paints a degraded strategic and operational environment from the current status quo. The US goal would be to isolate Afghan conflict and limit the negative impact on the region while preventing al Qaeda from establishing safe havens and terrorist training camps within Afghanistan. Although the US would likely not send ground troops into the country, it would likely conduct covert global strikes against suspected al Qaeda camps. The fragile Afghan security environment would be closely monitored but the United States would probably limit its strategic liability and allow the Afghans to determine their own future or let the regional actors take whatever measures necessary to arrest the deteriorating Afghan social, political and security environments.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Generally, developing cohesive and effective strategic concepts are “wicked problems” that are not amenable to simple cause-and-effect analyses. Developing illustrative scenarios holistically describing possible events and the interactions of the

major stakeholders helps visualize alternative futures and educate the mind of the strategist. The above four scenarios describe both positive and negative futures of Afghanistan and they also bring to light some key factors.

Five major themes emerged from these formulated scenarios: the involvement and importance of external stakeholders; the effectiveness of the Afghan government; the capabilities of Afghani security forces; the extent of ethnic divisions and the strength of the Taliban and other insurgent groups; and the will, interest and influence of the United States. A major characteristic of all the scenarios is the prevention of a return of al-Qaeda to Afghanistan that ensures that it no longer could export terrorism outside the Afghan borders.

Importantly, all four scenarios postulate a United States withdrawal with at least some negative consequence to Afghanistan. It is also increasingly evident that once the US and allied ground combat forces are physically withdrawn from Afghanistan, it will be extremely difficult to support their return -- almost under any circumstance short of another 9/11-like attack. Thus, the United States must be extremely cognizant of those actions required to posture the Afghan government for strategic success after the United States departs.

Three major aspects of the scenarios govern positive outcomes: first is the establishment of viable decentralized governance structures at the local, district and provincial levels; the second is the accommodation of moderate Taliban factions as part of that governance structure in select areas where they have a strong influence; the third is accomplishing these two BEFORE the United States completes its withdrawal. Very simply, decentralized governance is ingrained into the culture and traditions of the



Afghan society, as is the respect and referent authority of the Taliban in many parts of the country. Neither can likely be replaced with a central authority governing from Kabul without risking the continuation of the insurgency with potential disastrous consequences. To effect the transition to a decentralized, power sharing structure with the moderate Taliban incorporated, the US must begin and largely finish that effort BEFORE it withdraws. It would be folly to believe that a nascent Afghan security force could exercise the necessary degree of control to transition to local governance over radical Taliban insurgents in areas where the insurgents are entrenched. The challenges would be overwhelming for what will likely be a mediocre Afghan security force perceived to be supported by an illegitimate and corrupt central government.

Additionally, the United States must remain constructively engaged with all stakeholders and adopt a firm approach to dissuade regional actors from taking provocative actions to intervene in Afghanistan's internal affairs during and after the United States withdrawal. Instead, these stakeholders' cooperation should be solicited to work towards a stable and prosperous Afghanistan which is generally in all their vital interests. Furthermore, the United States must continue with financial and military assistance and encourage international institutions and donors to provide additional investments as well. At the same time, it must remain engaged with the installed moderate Taliban leaders and encourage them to eschew any relationship with al-Qaeda. Lastly, the United States must think through what are some of the possible consequences of a precipitous withdrawal on both Afghanistan and the region and prepare possible response strategies that include a viable plan to marshal and sustain the necessary political will to implement those options.

Most strategies inherently assume a positive outcome and are generally based upon optimistic assumptions about resourcing and the responses of various stakeholders. No strategist deliberately designs a strategy to fail. Although the above scenarios are intended to be illustrative and not predictive, they do serve to highlight potential strategic actions whose negative consequences may not have been otherwise considered. Importantly, they highlight the considerable challenges that will be faced by the Afghanistan that is left behind. Those dangers dictate that the current strategy must focus on more than merely improving the environment inside Afghanistan to facilitate and hasten an American departure, but rather one that is devoted to the long term security and prosperity of Afghanistan and the region.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, establishing the context for Afghan stability necessarily involves the key regional and global stakeholders. Towards that end, the US must employ major diplomatic measures to ease regional tensions, especially between India and Pakistan, with a focus on Kashmir. Through a resolute US commitment to long term stability in Afghanistan and the cooperation of key regional and global stakeholders, peace, prosperity and stability can be brought to this volatile region.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2009), xxi.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Afghanistan," the Tanner Lectures, Brasenose College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK, December 2, 2010, [www.ahmedrashid.com](http://www.ahmedrashid.com) (accessed December 31, 2010) "In most European countries, 60-70 % of their publics now believe that their troops should come home. For example, in Germany, a key country with 4,500 troops in Afghanistan, 77 % of the public believes that their troops should come home. Even in the US support has declined sharply. For the first time in the nine-year war, American polls are showing that more than 50 % of Americans believe that their troops should come home."

<sup>3</sup> The US President in his policy statement on Afghanistan in 2009 set a goal for the Afghanistan "to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to

prevent its capacity to threaten America and [its] allies in the future.” To meet that goal President Obama set the following objectives for Afghanistan: “the [US] must deny al Qaeda a safe-haven; [it] must reverse the Taliban’s momentum and deny it the ability to overthrow the government; and [it] must strengthen the capacity of Afghanistan’s Security Forces and government so that they can take lead responsibility for Afghanistan’s future.” He proposes to meet those objectives in three ways: (1) “the [US] will pursue a military strategy that will break the Taliban’s momentum and increase Afghanistan’s capacity over the next 18 months;” (2) “the [US] will work with its partners, the UN, and the Afghan people to pursue a more effective civilian strategy, so that the government can take advantage of improved security;” and (3) “the [US] will act with the full recognition that its success in Afghanistan is inextricably linked to its partnership with Pakistan.” Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan,” <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan> (accessed October 28, 2010).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Rashid, “It is time to rethink the west’s Afghan Strategy,” Financial Times, London, (June 24, 2010):1, [www.ahmedrashid.com](http://www.ahmedrashid.com) (accessed November 18, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Rashid, “Before the Endgame: America’s Fatal Flaws in Afghanistan,” Der Spiegel, (May 25, 2010) 1, [www.ahmedrashid.com](http://www.ahmedrashid.com) (accessed December 7, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Maleeha Lodhi, “Troubled Mission,” June 22, 2010, <http://voiceofkarachi.blogspot.com/2010/06/dr-maleeha-lodhi-troubled-mission.html> (accessed November 14, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Dorronsoro, “Fixing a Failed Strategy in Afghanistan,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2009): 1.

<sup>9</sup> All the past invaders of Afghanistan from Alexander the great to the British and Soviets had a similar experience of quick initial triumph leading to a long drawn, unending, costly and bloody conflict with the local tribes. Ahmed Rashid, *Decent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Viking, 2008), LIV.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires*, 315.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>14</sup> “The practice of Islam, the nonhierarchical structure of tribal group, and the Pashtun code known as the Pashtunwali” are the three main dominating features which influence the life and actions of Pashtuns. Ralph H. Magnus and Eden Naby, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>15</sup> Rashid, “Before the Endgame,” 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ashley J. Tellis and Aroop Mukharji, eds., "Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?" (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>21</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "Pakistan and the Afghanistan End Game," Yale Global, (March 12, 2010): 1, [www.ahmedrashid.com](http://www.ahmedrashid.com) (accessed November 18, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Tellis and Mukharji, eds, "Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?," 28.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Small, "China's Caution on Afghanistan – Pakistan," The Washington Quarterly, 33:3 (July 2010): 81.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>31</sup> Kevin Slaten, "China's Bigger Role in Pakistan, Afghanistan," South China Morning Post, February 12, 2009, [www.civic-exchange.org/wp/wp-content/uploads](http://www.civic-exchange.org/wp/wp-content/uploads) (accessed January 25, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Tellis and Mukharji, eds, "Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?," 71.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 81-83.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen J. Gerras, "Communication with External Audiences: A Stakeholder Management Approach," U.S. Army War College, Strategic Leadership, Selected Reading (Academic Year 2011), 75. This matrix is derived from a theoretical template provided in the reference.

<sup>41</sup> The Taliban is the largest of eight insurgent factions in Afghanistan. While the Taliban is spoken about as if it is a monolithic and cohesive entity, it is actually composed of numerous armed groups and individuals with diverse and many times disparate interests, goals, methods, and supporters. Taliban members include tribal chiefs, warlords, and militia members many of which disagree on issues, mistrust each other and, on occasion, are openly hostile. The Taliban ruled Afghanistan from September of 1996 to November of 2001. Most of the Taliban are Ghilzai Pashtuns and they dominate eastern and southern Afghanistan. Matt Waldman, "Dangerous Liaisons with the Afghan Taliban: The Feasibility and Risks of Negotiations," United States Institute of Peace (October 2010): 3.

<sup>42</sup> The Taliban's policies caused different Afghan factions to ally and form the anti-Taliban "Northern Alliance." In the Alliance were Uzbeks, Hazara Shiites, and even some hard-line Pashtun Islamist factions who opposed the Taliban government because of the increasing influence of al Qaeda. Kenneth Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress 7-5700 (April 20, 2010): 5-6.

<sup>43</sup> Afghanistan Study Group, "A New Way Forward: Rethinking U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan," August 16, 2010, [www.afghanistanstudygroup.org/NewWayForward\\_report.pdf](http://www.afghanistanstudygroup.org/NewWayForward_report.pdf), (accessed January 28, 2011): 2.

<sup>44</sup> Matt Waldman, "Dangerous Liaisons with the Afghan Taliban: The Feasibility and Risks of Negotiations," United States Institute of Peace (October 2010): 2.

<sup>45</sup> See the quarterly reports of the Afghan NGO Safety Office, 2006-10, [http://www.afgnso.org/index\\_files/page447.htm](http://www.afgnso.org/index_files/page447.htm) (accessed November 2010)

<sup>46</sup> Waldman, "Dangerous Liaisons with the Afghan Taliban," 2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>52</sup> Tellis and Mukharji, eds, "Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?," 101. See also the Report of the Secretary General, "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security," United Nations, General Assembly Security Council, Sixty-fourth session, Agenda Item 7 (22 Sep 2009): 18-24. The Annex to this report provides five useful benchmarks and indicators of progress that address these objectives and are listed under

(1) Governance and institution-building; (2) Security; (3) Economic and social development; (4) Human rights; and (5) Counter-narcotics.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Due to the short nature of the paper the process for the formulation of scenarios has not been included in the text.

<sup>59</sup> Alan Schwart, "Scenarios for the Insurgency in Iraq," United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 174 (October 2006): 4. The methodology and framework of the referenced study on Iraq was adopted in the description of the future scenarios for Afghanistan for this paper.

<sup>60</sup> In the context of this scenario, the term "abrupt" is used to describe the withdrawal of Allied forces that is based upon a pre-ordained timeline vice achieving the necessary strategic pre-conditions to ensure adequate internal security and effective Afghan governance.

<sup>61</sup> Ashley J. Tellis, "Reconciling with the Taliban? Toward an Alternative Grand Strategy in Afghanistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2009): 4.